

PUT SLEEP ON THE MENU

Contributed by Heidi Roth, RDN, CHHC

Sleep is a hot topic lately - we all want better sleep and more of it. There is nothing more frustrating than lying awake, especially when we keep hearing how important sleep is. Good sleep is crucial for consolidating memories, energy levels during the day, immune function, appetite control, and lower risk of heart disease and inflammation, among other things.

Although we cannot completely control the quality and length of our sleep (it's been said that the "enemy of sleep is effort"), we can create conditions that make good sleep more likely. Trying too hard to sleep can backfire, but consistent sleep habits can help.

- Keep a fairly consistent bedtime and wake time. Try to stay within 30 minutes of your standard time to avoid "social jet lag."
- Make the room dark. Invest in some blackout shades or an eye mask.
- Keep the room cool. 65 degrees is the ideal temperature, but pick what feels comfortable to you.
- Get outdoor light soon after waking, which helps reinforce your body's internal clock.
- Stop caffeine in the early afternoon as it can linger in the body for many hours. Limit alcohol which also interferes with sleep.

You may already know many of these strategies. What you may not realize is that what you put on the end of your fork, and when you eat it, might also have a big impact on sleep, so let's take a closer look.

Overall Diet Quality

A high-quality diet, such as the Mediterranean diet, is the easiest place to start and has been consistently shown to be beneficial. A balanced diet built on real, whole foods rich in vegetables, fruit, whole grains, beans, nuts and seeds with minimally processed foods is associated with better sleep than a diet dominated by refined carbohydrates and highly processed foods. A diet high in saturated fat and sugar seems to be especially detrimental to quality sleep, with studies showing more night-time awakenings.

Fiber

A high-fiber, plant-diverse diet has also been linked to more restorative sleep, including more deep and REM sleep and lower heart rate, within the same person. Meaning, on days when you get a lot of fiber, you are more likely to sleep better than on days when you don't get much fiber. One explanation for this could be that fiber feeds gut microbes, which produce beneficial sleep compounds.

Gut microbes

The gut and brain communicate continuously through what's known as the gut-brain axis. Gut microbes produce compounds that interact with the nervous and immune systems, and emerging research points to the gut microbiome as another contributor to sleep - and it goes both ways. Diet may influence sleep through the microbiome, while inadequate sleep may also adversely affect the microbial community. So, be sure to add in plenty of diverse plant foods, as well as some fermented foods to help maintain a healthy gut microbiome.

Blood Sugar Stability

Meals and snacks high in refined carbohydrates and added sugars can cause sharp rises, and subsequent falls, in blood glucose. Refined carbohydrates are grains that have been processed to remove much of their fiber and nutrients, such as white bread, many crackers and cereals, pastries, and foods made with white flour. When your blood sugar levels fall, your body releases cortisol, a stress hormone. Some early research suggests that these sharp rises and falls of blood sugar during the day may continue at night, with 3:00 am wake-ups, when cortisol is released to help steady blood sugar levels. Rather than avoiding carbohydrates, pair high-fiber carbohydrates with protein and healthy fats such as steel-cut oatmeal with nuts, Greek yogurt with fruit, or whole-grain toast with eggs.



Meal timing

Aim for consistent meal timing during the day to help anchor your circadian rhythm, which is your body's clock. Try not to eat within 3 hours of bedtime - eating late can send a "daytime" signal when your body is preparing for sleep, and it raises the risk of reflux and discomfort. Have a satisfying dinner with plenty of fiber, protein, and healthy fats to make sure you are not hungry right before bed.

What about Specific Sleep Foods and Nutrients?

Kiwi fruit and tart cherry juice have both been shown in some (very) small studies to be beneficial for sleep and are worth a try. Other foods high in melatonin include pistachios and walnuts. Higher dietary magnesium intake is also linked to better sleep duration and, more inconsistently, better sleep quality. The main magnesium-rich foods discussed across studies are leafy vegetables, whole grains, nuts, seeds, and legumes, so the evidence is really about diets higher in these foods, not about one specific "sleep food."

You may need to experiment to find out which of these tactics lead to better sleep. Perhaps you personally notice a difference with improving fiber intake but do better with a small snack right before bed. Keep track and see what works for you!

Finally, if these lifestyle and diet measures don't seem to move the needle much, you may want to consider CBT-I (Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Insomnia) with a licensed, experienced therapist. CBT-I addresses the thoughts and behaviors that contribute to insomnia and is considered the first-line treatment and "gold standard" for chronic insomnia.

PUMPKIN COCONUT SLEEPY BALLS

These pumpkin coconut balls are a good source of magnesium, making them the perfect pre-bedtime snack for anyone craving a better night's sleep!

INGREDIENTS:

- 1½ cups old-fashioned oats
- 1 cup unsweetened shredded coconut
- ½ cup chopped slivered almonds (optional)
- ¾ cup canned pumpkin
- 2 tablespoons honey
- 2 teaspoons pumpkin pie spice
- ¼ teaspoon kosher salt
- ⅛ teaspoon cayenne pepper

PREPARATION:

1. Preheat oven to 300° F. Place oats, coconut and almonds (if using) on a large, rimmed baking sheet lined with parchment paper or nonstick foil. Bake, stirring once or twice until lightly browned, 8 - 10 minutes. Allow mixture to cool completely.
2. Combine the pumpkin, honey, pumpkin pie spice, salt, and cayenne in a large mixing bowl. Stir in the toasted oat mixture. Shape the mixture into 20 balls, about 2 teaspoons each. Place balls on a serving tray. Serve immediately or cover and refrigerate for up to two days.

How will you eat for better sleep?



Heidi Roth, RD, LDN is a Registered/Licensed Dietitian, Health Coach and nutrition expert with a passion for health and wellness. She graduated from the University of Pittsburgh with a BS in Nutrition and Dietetics.

